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ABSTRACT

An overview is presented of the current status of competency testing for teacher certification. The question of the effect of certification tests on the quality of hired teachers is briefly discussed. Statistics are presented on types of tests used by various states, with particular attention to differences in the cut-off scores for passage of a teacher certification test, whether on a test developed by one state or a nationally-normed test set by individual states. Correlations between the scores on admission tests and subsequent teacher certification test scores in several southern states are analyzed. The structure and validity of some state-developed tests and nationally-normed tests are considered. Also examined are the relatively low test scores of minority groups and the effects of this phenomenon on schools with predominantly minority students. A brief discussion is presented on issues raised by testing for recertification which has been mandated in Arkansas and Texas. (JD)

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TESTING TEACHERS FOR CERTIFICATION AND RECERTIFICATION

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Perhaps the reason I have been asked to address the topic of certification and recertification testing of teachers is that the current spate of activities has been focused on the South. In 1981, when Dean Sandefur conducted his first survey of teacher competency testing, he found that 16 states used or planned to use tests as part of their certification process, and of these, 11 were in the region encompassed by the Southern Regional Education Board.¹

There are several reasons that may account for the emphasis on teacher testing in the South. First, perhaps the need to safeguard against teachers who lack the most basic of the academic skills was greater in the South than in the rest of the nation. Although the Southern states are making headway in closing the gap on academic achievement measures, such as SAT scores, the gap still lingers as a result of previous shortcomings in the educational system, and of income differentials. Second, the movement to test for high school graduation began in the South, and set the stage for testing teachers. Third, there is a history of regional cooperation in the South, spurred by the Southern Regional Education Board. Therefore, when in 1981 the SREB Task Force for Higher Education and the Schools recommended in The Need for Quality that teacher applicants be tested for minimum academic achievement levels before certification, the Southern states moved almost in unison to enact statewide mandates towards this objective. The two states that have enacted legislation requiring tests for recertification purposes are also in the Southern Region: Arkansas and Texas. SREB has had no policy on testing for recertification.

Since 1981, teacher testing has spread rapidly among the other regions of the U.S., so that by my latest count, 27 states are now committed to using tests for teacher certification. An additional 13 states are considering such action. When you analyze the geographic distribution of "testing" states, each region in the country is represented, although New England and Upper Plains have shown the least movement in this direction.

Before discussing the issues on testing for certification and recertification, I will present a few summary statistics about the kinds of tests that are being utilized:

18 states use the NTE or other tests prepared by ETS

8 use a test customized for their own state

1 has not made a final decision on which test to use.

STATES TESTING:

<u>Subject Areas</u>			<u>Basic Skills and Professional Education</u>	
NTE	Customized	Not Yet Chosen	ETS	Customized
16	4	1	2	4

*some states that use subject area tests also test for basic and/or general knowledge.

Twenty states mandate that prospective teachers be tested prior to admission into teacher education programs. (Where the responsibility for and choice of an admissions test is left up to the individual college or university, states are not included in this count.) Of these, fifteen states mandate testing before admission into education programs, as well as at exit, for teacher certification.

ISSUES IN TEACHER CERTIFICATION TESTS

Do Certification Tests Affect the Quality of Hired Teachers?

The rationale for testing prospective teachers is based on the assumption that one cannot teach what one does not know. While knowing something does not guarantee that the ability is present to transmit the knowledge to students, it is a necessary, if not sufficient, qualification for teaching. This assumption has been accepted as self-evident by legislators, who, in many states, were the instigators of the teacher testing movement. Several impressions contributed to the move that teachers ought to be tested for academic knowledge, either in basic skills and/or in the subject areas to be taught. The popular press publicized samples of grossly misspelled teachers' notes. The declining SAT scores of students indicating education as their prospective

majors, and the general disenchantment with the academic preparation of college graduates, contributed to the decision that incompetent applicants had to be weeded out of the teacher corps.

While legislators, as interpreters of public perceptions, do not necessarily employ research data to draw up legislation, one notable research study does lend credence to the notion that what a teacher knows has an effect on student learning gains. Coleman, in his monumental report of 1966, Equality of Educational Opportunity,² found that most of the differences in achievement outcomes are accounted for by socio-economic differences among children. But the verbal ability of teachers, as measured by vocabulary testing, was an important variable in explaining differential learning outcomes, once socio-economic variables were standardized. Indeed, the teachers' verbal ability, as measured by tests, was the single most important characteristic of teachers in explaining student outcomes variation. At the least, this tells us that testing prospective teachers on their knowledge of and use of English is likely to improve student learning.

Research studies seeking a link between NTE scores and teacher performance in the classroom have generally resulted in low correlations, both negative and positive.³ One factor that has not received a great deal of attention is how teachers themselves feel about competency tests for certification purposes. The teacher organizations vary in their posture on the subject. AFT has not objected to the tests, while the NEA has come around reluctantly to condoning them. But what is more important, perhaps, is how individual teachers feel about competency tests. The Metropolitan Life Insurance Survey, The American Teacher,⁴ conducted in 1984 by the Louis Harris polling associates, found that 82 percent of the teachers felt strongly positive or somewhat positive about requiring teachers to take competency tests before certification.

Level of Cut-Off Scores

The cut-off scores for passage of a teacher certification test, whether on a test developed for one state, or a nationally-normed test, are set by the individual states.

The level at which cut-off scores are set usually depends on several factors: the minimum level of knowledge considered necessary by the panel of individuals chosen to recommend cut-off scores, the number of individuals who pass tests in pilot attempts, and the teacher supply and demand factors in a state. Thus, cut-off scores for a teaching field in which there is a scarcity of applicants are sometimes set at a lower percentage of correct answers than is true for a different teaching field.

The minimal level at which cut-off scores are set is illustrated in two Southern states. For elementary education, the Louisiana and Mississippi subject area cut-offs fall at the 27th and 13th percentiles respectively on the 1983 NTE national norms. On the Communication Skills test of the Core Battery, cut-off scores fall at the 15th and 10th percentiles for Louisiana and Mississippi respectively. These cut-off scores are no guarantees of "quality," but rather of a very minimal floor.

On state-developed tests, the cut-off score is sometimes also low. In Florida, the cut-off scores on the state-developed basic skills tests are set at 70% correct answers for mathematics, 86% for reading and 57% for classroom management portions respectively. These cut-offs represent raised levels established in 1983 following a good deal of newspaper publicity indicating the test to be quite easy. Indeed, one private school had administered the test to 6th graders, who scored 70 to 100 percent correct on sample questions.

Testing at Certification--Too Late?

The SREB Task Force for Higher Education and the Schools in 1981 recognized that "it is more fair to aspiring teachers to discover early in their training whether they need remedial work or if they are not suited to the profession than to eliminate them after an investment of four years."⁵ Thus, the Task Force recommended testing for admission into teacher education programs.

At present, 20 states mandate minimum scores on an objective test for admission into teacher education programs. Some states use SAT or ACT scores, while others have adopted the pre-professional skills test developed by the Educational Testing Service.

Correlations between the scores on the admissions tests and the subsequent teacher certification tests are quite high. For example, a study in North Carolina for SAT and NTE performance for 3,344 graduates of the University of North Carolina, shows a very high relationship between SAT scores and the percentage of students passing the NTE Commons. At or above a 900 combined SAT score the passage rate on the Commons (then set at 529) ran from 94 percent to 100 percent; and then dropped to 75 percent for SAT's in the 800's, and to 35 percent for SAT's in the 700's.⁶

In Florida, where the College Level Academic Skills Test (CLAST) is now required for completion of an associate level degree or for admission to upper division status in a state university, the idea has been raised that the state's teacher certification test may become redundant. Students who have passed the CLAST will know more than is required for the minimum score on the Florida Teachers Certification test.

The current minimum SAT score required in some states for admission into teacher education colleges (often set around the 835 level) may indicate that the minimum teacher certification test scores will need to be raised, or the latter will be redundant in terms of performance demonstrated on admission test scores. Indeed, failures on teacher certification tests may be a function of low admission standards into teacher education programs, which in many cases are being corrected--states have mandated such changes. This would indicate that teacher certification tests may become less important in the future as the higher admission standards take hold and produce a higher caliber of teacher applicants.

There has been a great deal of emphasis on tightening the curriculum in the high schools, which, one would hope, will eventually improve the caliber of students entering into teacher education programs. There is an equal need to focus on the college curriculum, which has become diluted. SREB is currently examining the transcripts of 6,500 college graduates of major universities in the region. Half of these graduates are education majors and the other half are arts and science graduates. Each of the courses on the

transcript of these graduates is being coded, so that we will produce profiles of the kinds of general education, subject area and pedagogy courses taken by college graduates. Although the results of this study, which is funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, will not be complete until 1985, it will demonstrate the need to tighten the core curriculum for college students, including, of course, education majors.

State-Developed Tests and Nationally-Normed Tests

Of the 27 states now using or planning to use teacher certification tests, 18 use a nationally-normed test and 8 use a test developed specifically for that state. One additional state has not yet chosen the tests.

The use of nationally-normed tests enables states to evaluate the performance of teacher applicants against national standards. In the current educational reform climate, with the attention that is focused on comparing student achievement scores between states, there is a similar emphasis to using a national standard against which state performance on teacher tests can be assessed.

The development of customized state tests usually results from the desire to make the tests as acceptable as possible to teachers within a state. Designing test items against objectives that are developed by teachers within a state is a means of "selling" the test on the basis that it represents the curriculum established for that state. Yet, there are some myths associated with this philosophy. First, it is questionable whether the curriculum in certain basic subjects such as English and mathematics is really different from state to state. Since more and more students are to be tested on nationally-normed tests, as governors and other public officials seek comparisons on how state educational reforms are taking hold, there is less reason to believe that the curriculum will vary from state to state. Secondly, even where a state contracts with a test development firm for a customized test, that firm usually has a bank of test items that it uses for its clients, so that even a customized test represents a medley of nationally used items.

From the perspective of applicants for teaching positions in states other than the one in which they were certified, the use of nationally-normed tests presents decided advantages. A teacher who has an acceptable NTE score in one state can use that score when moving to a different state that also uses the NTE. But if that teacher moves to a state that uses a customized test, another examination must be taken. This is expensive to teachers, who usually must pay for the test administration. A case in point is Florida, which uses its own test of basic skills and professional education. Although the state imports more than half of its teachers, it has not developed a cross-walk between results on its own test and NTE scores. Neither does it recognize a given NTE score in lieu of its own test score.

The Southern Governors' Association in 1983 passed a resolution urging states to develop reciprocity agreements that would enable teachers who have taken a test in one state to use the score on that test instead of being required to take another test. However, states have not moved to implement this recommendation. The Southern Regional Education Board and the Southeastern Educational Improvement Council have both worked with state certification officials to obtain such action. But states have not moved on this recommendation.

For some subject areas where few teachers are tested, there are no NTE tests. For example, there is no test for teachers of the German language. This caused South Carolina, which uses the NTE, to develop additional tests at considerable expense for the areas in which there are no tests. Such efforts are not productive if a cut-off score is to be based on the curve of teachers' performance, since too few individuals are taking the test to produce a curve.

States that have developed their own tests are faced with the expensive proposition of having to develop new versions of the tests as the years go by. This has led to some interest on the part of certification and testing officials to develop a bank of test items for various subject areas, or at least for those subjects that have few test applicants.

Then, states could dip into the test bank, as well as the objectives represented by the test items, in order to create new versions of the test at lower expense, instead of recontracting for new test versions. Although this appears to be a useful concept, it has not progressed beyond the idea stage.

Minorities

The single most important issue regarding teacher certification tests involves the high failure rates among minority candidates. Statistics on these results have been published throughout the country. In state after state, the results show failure rates among black candidates as high as two-thirds, while white applicants fail in the 10 to 30 percent range, depending on which state is examined. Minority failure rates are no lower in states that have designed their own tests (Arizona and Georgia are examples) than in states that use the NTE or another nationally-normed test. Failure rates for Hispanics are also higher than for white applicants. However, in Florida at the latest administration of the state-developed test, the failure rate for almost half of the Hispanic candidates was lower than for blacks. In Arizona, on the other hand, the failure rate for Hispanics exceeded the rate for blacks.

There is no doubt that if such failure rates continue, minority representation in the teaching force will decline. In 1980, 12.5 percent of the teaching force was minority, (8.6 percent black) while 26.7 percent of student enrollments were minority. The percentage of minority teachers remained steady from the early 1970's through 1980.

The percentage of minority children in the nation's schools is rising at the same time that minority representation among teachers is threatened. The decline in minority teaching force represents not only failure rates on tests, but also a more severe decline of minority enrollments in teacher education programs relative to white students. The decline in enrollment for teacher education in recent years among the predominantly black colleges of education is double that of other member institutions of the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education.⁸ While the fear of failing tests may account for some of the black decline, a more potent factor is probably the growth

of opportunities for blacks in fields other than teaching. The impact of affirmative action programs in recent years may have had a greater impact on luring prospective teacher education majors into other fields than it has had on white female students.

The bottom line of the problem centers on what will have the greater negative impact on children in the schools: the lack of role models on minority children if black representation among teachers declines, or the possibility that teachers with less than the minimum qualifications will teach in the nation's schools. (It should be remembered at this point that the cut-off scores are minimal, and that minority teachers may or may not be teaching in schools with predominantly black enrollments.)

William Raspberry, a black education writer for the Washington Post, comments on this dilemma. "I assume the tests are culturally biased. But if they are biased in favor of the culture in which our children will have to operate, is that unreasonable? I assume that one of the reasons minority applicants fare worse on the tests than whites is that they themselves are the victims of inferior schooling. But is that any reason to perpetuate the disadvantage by putting victims in charge of the classrooms? We can have well-educated children or ignorant teachers. We cannot have both."⁹

Perhaps there are some glimmers of hope that would indicate emerging solutions to the dilemma. Current passage rates on teacher certification tests do not yet reflect the tightened academic standards in the nation's public schools. As these take hold, there is the hope that basic skills, which fundamentally account for the failure rates on teacher certification tests, will improve. Indeed, the trend on SAT score differentials between blacks and whites from 1976 through 1983 shows a narrowing of the gap. Predominantly black institutions whose graduates have had high failure rates on teacher certification tests are moving to improve their academic programs, to expose students to test-taking and to sharpen their ability to use reasoning skills. Indeed, the Southern Regional Education Board and the Educational Testing Service cooperated during 1983 in an effort toward these objectives with a number of predominantly black colleges. It is too early to know whether these efforts will pay off.

There is one piece of evidence about minority performance on teacher certification tests that has not received much attention. Ayres analyzed the performance on the NTE Commons section of 3,334 students by race, and by SAT scores, for graduates of 15 senior public colleges and universities in North Carolina, of which ten are predominantly white and five are predominantly black.¹⁰ He found that once SAT scores were controlled, blacks attending predominantly white institutions scored an average of 25 points higher on the NTE Commons than blacks in predominantly black institutions. Although only 19 whites attended the predominantly black colleges, once their SAT's were controlled, they scored 37 points lower on the NTE Commons than whites in predominantly white institutions.

These results indicate that efforts to tighten the academic program in the predominantly black colleges do have the potential of raising scores on the NTE. Obviously, there is an urgent need to pursue this policy.

Testing for Recertification

Two states have passed legislation requiring certified teachers and administrators to take tests in order to remain certified: Arkansas and Texas. In Arkansas, the test is to be administered for the first time in the spring of 1985, and will be a basic skills test. A testing firm has been employed to construct the test, after the Education Testing Service declined the use of the NTE for recertification purposes. Arkansas certified personnel will be required to pass the test on functional academic skills (including, but not limited to, reading, writing, and mathematics) within two years, and they must also take a nationally recognized test in the subject area in which they teach, the latter being replaceable by successful completion of six semester hours in content courses applicable to the teaching field. Successful passage of the NTE for initial certification satisfies the requirements of this law.

In Texas, the legislation for the testing of certified personnel passed in the spring of 1984. The law specifies that for secondary teachers, the examinations to be chosen by the State Board of Education shall cover the subject area in which the teacher is

certified. Teachers and administrators shall be involved in the development of the examinations, and the test is to be passed before June 30, 1986. (A teacher may teach under an emergency certificate only one school year if the test is not passed.)

It is, of course, too early to determine the effects of these new laws, and whether other states will move in the same direction. It may be assumed that these laws will be tested in the courts, just as the initial teacher certification test laws were challenged. The latter have survived challenges, but the legal precedent for testing for entrance into a profession, in view of the ubiquitous licensing laws, is probably stronger than for testing once individuals have been employed. At that stage, the question of vested interests in one's job will be invoked against the public's right to safeguard standards in its schools. How that will come out is anybody's guess right now.

There is one more juncture at which teachers may be tested in the future. In many of the proposals for master teacher plans, or for career ladders, the test has been suggested at some stage in the ladder. In Tennessee, for example, the entrance into the career ladder sequence commenced this summer with administration of a subject area test for all applicants.

In Florida, subject area tests are required as part of the career ladder system. The University of South Florida is to develop the required subject area tests. (The State Department of Education chose not to validate the National Teacher Examinations for most teaching fields.)

The concept of passing another test for a higher level of qualification in a profession does have precedent in other professions. The Certified Public Accountant's test and the specialty board tests in medical fields are examples. They constitute more advanced levels of achievement than are required for initial entrance into a profession.

In evaluating the whole movement of testing teachers, it is important to remember that we are in the midst of a tremendous wave of demand for accountability. This has developed because of the general public disenchantment with the effectiveness of both public and higher education. I feel certain that when the day comes that high

school graduates have mastered basic skills, and a modicum of other core subjects, and when college graduates demonstrate the ability to think critically, in addition to having mastered such basics as the ability to write a cogent paragraph and to decide correctly which number has to be divided by the other number to calculate a percentage, then the public demand for tests and accountability will diminish. Until then, testing at all levels will be considered necessary.

Notes

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TEACHER COMPETENCY TESTING

	Admissions Test	Competency Test for Certification in Effect or Mandated				Considering Testing	Testing All Teachers	Testing for Merit or Career Ladders
		Subject Area	Other	ETS or ETS	Not Decided Yet			
Alabama	yes	yes						
Alaska								
Arizona	yes		yes					
Arkansas				yes			yes	
California				yes				
Colorado	yes			yes				
Connecticut			yes					
Delaware				yes				
Florida	yes		yes					yes
Georgia		yes						
Hawaii						yes		
Idaho								
Illinois						yes		
Indiana				yes				
Iowa		(for state yes schools)				yes		
Kansas	yes			yes				
Kentucky	yes			yes				
Louisiana	yes			yes				
Maine								
Maryland						yes		
Massachusetts								
Minnesota						yes		
Mississippi	yes			yes				
Missouri	yes			yes				
Montana	yes							
Nebraska				yes				
Nevada	yes					yes		
New Hampshire						yes		
New Jersey	yes			yes				
New Mexico	yes			yes				
New York				yes				
North Carolina	yes			yes				
North Dakota						yes		
Ohio						yes (36 school districts use ETS Basic Skills Test)		
Oklahoma		yes						
Oregon			yes					
Pennsylvania						yes		
Rhode Island						yes		
South Carolina	yes			yes				
South Dakota						yes		
Tennessee	yes			yes				yes
Texas	yes				yes		yes	
Utah	yes							
Vermont								
Virginia				yes				
Washington								
West Virginia	yes	yes						
Wisconsin						yes		
Wyoming	yes							

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